

# QUAGLIA INSTITUTE FOR STUDENT ASPIRATIONS

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## ASPIRATIONS RESEARCH CENTER

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### RESEARCH AGENDA

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THE WORK OF THE ASPIRATIONS RESEARCH CENTER IS MADE POSSIBLE  
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# Listen.

The mission of the Aspirations Research Center (ARC) is to collect and analyze data to better understand school environments. Our motto: Listen. Learn. Lead. We *listen* first and foremost to the voices of students—hundreds of thousands of them—along with those of school staff and administrators. We do this by way of our surveys (i.e., the *My Voice*™ Surveys, the *iKnow My Class* Survey), as well as through direct conversations with students, staff, and administrators in schools. We also pay heed to educational researchers, typically through the words of their scholarly publications, for insights into contemporary thinking on important issues in the field of education. We *learn* from these voices, not only by seeking theoretical and practical understanding from the insights they provide, but also through rigorous analysis of data collected via both quantitative (e.g., surveys) and qualitative (e.g., interviews, focus groups) methods. And we *lead* by way of sharing this knowledge with the world, most directly through our work in schools, as well as through our contributions to the educational research and practitioner literature, conference presentations, etc.

# Learn.

Our research agenda involves a healthy dose of listening, learning, and leading. In this document, we present our assessment of the research issues of most pressing concern to QISA, the Student Engagement Trust (SET), and the ARC. We further lay out a research agenda for addressing these issues given the current and anticipated resources available to do so.

# Lead.

One integral aspect of the mission of the ARC is to develop partnerships to help facilitate and further the reach of our work. In particular, we continue our strong partnership with the Pearson Foundation; through their national and international connections we reach out to thousands of schools and communities, as well as professional and academic organizations, in the United States and across the globe. For example, through our collaboration with the Pearson Foundation and the Ohio Department of Education, we will have the essential capacity to engage in our cutting-edge research on a large scale. Furthermore, we take great pride in working closely with our many other partners and forging new collaborations with all those interested in advancing the knowledge base of students' aspirations, engagement, and voice in school.

## Research Interests

We have identified three parallel strands of ARC research interests. First, consistent with QISA's primary mission, we will continue to address the conditions that foster student aspirations in schools and learning communities around the world. Our focus on aspirations encompasses not only the conditions that foster them, but also the benefits of having and working toward them, and how they differ as a function of a variety of individual and contextual (especially school-related) factors. In particular, we are interested in exploring a variety of characteristics, hypothesized predictors, and hypothesized outcomes of aspirations as listed in Table I (among others, as they emerge as relevant). This research focus will be advanced most prominently in our statewide work in Ohio through our partnership with the Pearson Foundation and the Ohio DOE, including vital scale development work for improved assessment of aspirations.

**Table 1.** Characteristics, predictors, and outcomes hypothesized to be related to aspirations

Characteristics related to aspirations	Predictors of aspirations	Outcomes of aspirations
Gender Race/Ethnicity Age/Grade level Socioeconomic status (school-level) Type of school (e.g., public, private) Location of school (e.g., urban, rural) Country of school (i.e., US vs. UK) School size/Student-teacher ratio Safety of neighborhood around school	Active/School engagement Self-worth/Self-efficacy Teacher support Peer relations School relevance School pride Perceptions of bullying Creativity/Innovation Responsibility for learning	Academic achievement School dropout Active/School engagement Self-worth/Self-efficacy Leadership Teacher respect

Second, the ARC will begin to build a research agenda around the work of the SET in the UK, with a particular focus on student engagement. We will start by writing and submitting for publication (in a prominent UK journal) our recently formulated SET Model of Student Engagement. This model describes the process through which the three primary components of a classroom learning environment—the student, the teacher, and the curricular content—come together to promote students’ engagement. In particular, this model posits that when student-teacher relationships are strong, the content of the class is perceived as relevant, and the teacher demonstrates expertise in his or her delivery of that content, students are likely to be meaningfully engaged. Beyond these components of the model, we are interested in the relations among engagement and a number of other student and classroom environmental factors, including: students’ perceptions of the teacher’s positive pedagogical practices in the class, students’ sense of efficacy in the class, students’ perceptions of a cooperative learning environment in the class, students’ perceptions of discipline problems in the class, and indicators of critical thinking in the class. These factors, along with the primary components of the SET model, align with many of the core competencies of both the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills framework prevalent in education circles in the US, as well as the Personal, Social, Health, and Economic Education initiative in the UK.

Third, stemming from the newest QISA initiative, *Students for Solutions*, we will devote considerable attention to the notion of student voice. Student voice has been advanced as an integral component of student development for many years, but only recently has it emerged as a topic of central interest in the educational research community. As such, one of the first steps in developing a research agenda around student voice is a thorough review of the extant literature. From this review, we will ascertain the gaps in knowledge which QISA and the ARC are uniquely equipped to fill. Moreover, we plan to develop a first-of-its-kind survey assessment of the construct of student voice, which will both help us advance our own research agenda as well as contribute an essential measurement tool to the field. To this end, we plan to leverage our extensive surveying capacity in Ohio, which provides the demographic and socioeconomic diversity necessary to create a fully representative scale. Our enhanced understanding of student voice through this component of our research agenda will help us advance our *Students for Solutions* initiative, ultimately to the benefit of both students and their schools.

## Research Agenda

While not all aspects of the aforementioned research issues are amenable to immediate incorporation into our research agenda, we have identified a number of research questions in each strand of interest on which we intend to presently focus.

### Aspirations

Our research agenda around aspirations will be driven by three primary questions:

#### 1) What role can schools play in promoting their students' aspirations?

This question, which has been central to QISA's work since its inception, will be addressed in terms of both its breadth and depth. Our breadth of understanding will be enhanced primarily via a quantitative approach, analyzing the hundreds of thousands of *My Voice* Surveys we have collected and continue to collect in collaboration with the Pearson Foundation, especially through our expansive work in Ohio. For example, we are advancing a research project already in progress using *My Voice* Survey responses to test a hypothesized model wherein certain conditions of the school environment (i.e., teacher support and positive peer environment) predict greater student engagement in school, which in turn predicts higher levels of aspirations. We are also interested in investigating relations among aspirations and other important constructs measured on the *My Voice* Survey, including self-worth/self-efficacy and students' perceived relevance of school, as well as (secondarily) school pride and perceptions of bullying.

Plans are additionally underway to add short "modules" to administrations of *My Voice* Surveys in selected schools, which will enable us to explore even more constructs of interest and their relations with aspirations, such as creativity and innovation, and students' sense of responsibility for their own learning. The addition of these modules to our Ohio survey administrations in particular will provide the mechanism through which we will develop our new-and-improved measure of aspirations (as well as student voice).

We also intend to investigate whether aspirations, and any relationships among aspirations and these various constructs, vary as a function of individual- and school-level characteristics such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status. In particular, we will address an important gap in the literature with regard to international comparisons, namely between the US and UK.

To provide a greater depth of understanding regarding how schools promote (and sometimes inhibit) the development of aspirations, we will be conducting focus groups and interviews with the students and staff at some of our Demonstration Sites. These qualitative data will help us better understand not only what typically or "on average" predicts higher aspirations in schools (as our survey data will help elucidate), but also how the specific lived experiences of students foster (or frustrate) aspirations. Examples of focus group and interview questions might include: What kinds of opportunities do you [the student] feel your school provides you to explore and engage your aspirations? How do teachers, as well as other students, in your school support (or inhibit) your aspirations? Provided the logistical apparatus can be put in place, we will also look to conduct longitudinal follow-up interviews with a subset of these students so we can gather further insights into the development of aspirations over time.

## 2) Do higher levels of aspirations lead to desirable outcomes?

While our many years of work in schools and a solid grounding in the research literature undergird our great confidence that high aspirations beget a variety of positive outcomes, it is time for us to demonstrate this through our own rigorous research. Using school-level data, we will investigate whether middle schools and high schools with higher levels of aspirations are more likely to have higher achievement, greater levels of teacher respect for students, and lower dropout rates. We will also test whether aspirations, and relations among aspirations and these desirable outcomes, vary as a function of various school characteristics, including socioeconomic status, school size, student-teacher ratio, type of school (e.g., public, private), location of school (e.g., urban vs. rural, US vs. UK), and whether the school is located in a safe neighborhood. We will secondarily explore at the student level whether there are reciprocal relations among aspirations and school engagement, and whether higher aspirations at the student level are related to higher levels of school-related efficacy and self-perceptions of leadership.

## 3) How and why do students select and pursue their specific aspirations?

To date, our understanding of aspirations has mostly attended to magnitude (i.e., the higher the better). However, with the addition of our qualitative agenda, we will begin to systematically explore the specific content of students' aspirations, and how and why that content has emerged for particular young people. In particular, we will incorporate questions into our focus groups and interviews such as: What types of aspirations do you pursue? What are the reasons behind your aspirations, and how do they motivate you? We will additionally explore what role identity formation plays in the development of aspirations, and how students' aspirations function as part of their broader adaptive developmental regulation.

Additionally, while not specific to our focus on students' aspirations and of secondary (yet still high) interest, we will be exploring avenues through which we might compare the data we have collected on the staff version of the *My Voice Survey* to the students' *My Voice* responses, namely at the school level. For example, both surveys provide assessments of students' and teachers' respect for each other; these data could be used to provide profiles of schools in terms of the (mis)alignment among responses and what affect this "culture of respect" might have on students' aspirations and engagement in school. This approach may also be brought to bear on the student voice research agenda, as below.

## Student Engagement

Our research agenda on student engagement will be driven by three primary questions:

- 1) **How do student-teacher relationships relate to engagement in the classroom?**
- 2) **How do students' perceptions of the relevance of the class content relate to engagement?**
- 3) **Do students' levels of engagement, perceived relevance of class content, and relationships with their teachers vary as a function of individual characteristics (e.g., gender, age), school characteristics (e.g., traditional vs. vocational, US vs. UK), and subject (e.g., math vs. the creative arts)?**

Each of these research questions will be addressed primarily using data from the *iKnow My Class Survey*. Additionally, it is anticipated that structures may soon be in place in the UK to allow for the linking of survey responses to student information system data; this would permit the expansion of the research agenda exploring student engagement to include a number of other student-level variables, including (among others) academic achievement and absenteeism.

Of secondary (yet still keen) interest will be our exploration of the role of a number of other constructs tapped into through the *iKnow My Class Survey* in the engagement process, including students' sense of efficacy in the class, students' perceptions of the teacher's positive pedagogical practices in the class, students' perceptions of a cooperative learning environment in the class, students' perceptions of discipline problems in the class, and indicators of the presence and fostering of critical thinking in the class. We may explore these additional constructs as part of our larger SET model, or as contributors in and of themselves to student engagement.

## Student Voice

Our research agenda around student voice will be driven by three primary research questions. These questions have been informed by our experience in schools and a preliminary review of the extant literature, though we may narrow or expand our scope upon further review of the field.

### 1) **What promotes student voice in schools?**

Under the umbrella of this overarching question lies a number of subordinate ones, such as: What are the psychological characteristics of the student (e.g., self-efficacy, sense of school pride) and aspects of the school environment (e.g., teacher support, school resources) that predict student voice? What are the school-related opportunities (e.g., student governance, student representation on committees), or lack thereof, that promote (or inhibit) students' expression of their voices? How do students and schools create such opportunities and overcome such obstacles? Providing answers to these questions will require a multipronged approach, including the application of both quantitative and qualitative methods investigated by way of our surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

## **2) What are the benefits, both individual- and school-level, of the expression of student voice?**

As with aspirations, our extensive work in schools—which, by its very nature, directly involves student voice—provides a solid foundation for our hypotheses that when students are provided opportunities to authentically express their voices, both they and their schools benefit. Using our *My Voice* Survey data, in combination with our new assessment of student voice, we will explore this research question (as well as the previous one) in a manner quite similar to how we will address the analogous research questions around aspirations (i.e., analyzing relations among student voice and the constructs listed in Table I). Moreover, as with the previous research question, we will use data collected via focus groups and interviews to better understand the processes of how and why expressing student voice leads to intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits for the students, what a school culture that embraces student voice can (and should) look like, and how the messages conveyed through students' voices effect real change in school policy. This qualitative piece of our larger research agenda, which entails close cooperation with school administrators and staff, will specifically be advanced in our Ohio Demonstration Sites, where we have established strong partnerships.

## **3) Do any of the abovementioned relations vary as a function of (i.e., are they moderated by) some other individual- or school-level characteristic (e.g., gender, age, socioeconomic status)? Are there any intermediate factors that facilitate (i.e., act as mediators of) these relations?**

Before embarking on our empirical research agenda on this topic, we will complete an ongoing review of the academic literature on student voice. This review will be quite comprehensive and will integrate similar notions such as student empowerment and youth participatory action research. We intend to write up this review for publication in a top educational research journal, filling an apparent gap in the literature on this important topic.

Beyond the previously noted methodological approaches, we will also seek out opportunities to develop case studies of students and schools (namely in our Ohio Demonstration Sites) which will help us further appreciate the complexities of student voice (as well as aspirations). Additionally, we will explore the possibility of engaging youth involved in *Students for Solutions* in action research, wherein they become partners in the research process and help co-construct the continuing development of our research agenda. Similarly, we intend to work with our Demonstration Sites, especially in Ohio, to enable teachers to engage in their own action research, ideally for both the benefit of their schools' improvement efforts as well as to provide opportunities for collaborations with our research team to jointly publish their work.

Given the relative paucity of empirical research on student voice, we believe we stand to make a substantial contribution to the field in this domain. As with our work on aspirations and student engagement, we further aspire to share what we learn with practitioners through our work in schools, as well as through professional publications read by practitioners in the field, policy makers, and the general public.